



## "Honor Trumps Emotion"

"During my last deployment, I saw leaders deal with a range of emotions during some tough situations. Good leaders always overcame their emotions and maintained the higher road. I believe their sense of honor allowed no less. I know, if permitted, emotion influences rational decision making; however, honor will always trump emotion."

- MAJ Elden Lacer, AV, HBCT Aviation Officer, OIF

Combined intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities on the modern battlefield provide a wealth of information to commanders at all levels. Through the course of daily operations in Iraq, a tactical unmanned aerial vehicle (TUAV) provided detailed surveillance of a group of insurgents attempting to emplace improvised explosive devices (IEDs) along a city road. Surveillance of the particular event began when the TUAV operators discovered several men digging holes beside a road. Over the course of 30 minutes, the TUAV tracked the insurgents digging the holes, securing IEDs from concealed positions further down the road, loading the IEDs into a cargo van, transporting them to the holes, and beginning their emplacement. During this time, the brigade redirected an attack team of two Apache helicopters to gain visual contact with the insurgents in preparation for interdiction. However, as the Apaches closed on their targets, the insurgents sensed the aircraft and quickly reloaded the IEDs back into the van before speeding away from the holes and down a side road that skirted a cow pasture full of trees. After stopping the van, the occupants exited the vehicle with the IEDs, stashed them in the tree line, and then dispersed in many directions to escape observation.

Unfortunately, the team of Apaches was able to track only one insurgent who hid beneath one of the trees beside the road. The Apache pilots, eager to destroy the insurgents who had been preparing to kill American soldiers, requested permission to engage. The brigade aviation officer (BAO), however, responded with orders to monitor the target until he could obtain approval from the brigade commander. When the brigade commander received an update from the BAO, he wanted confirmation from the pilots on a number of issues, beginning with whether or not the pilots still had positive identification of the insurgent. After the pilots confirmed having eyes on the target, the commander next wanted to know the risk of collateral damage to the area, to which the pilots confirmed was minimal due to the rural nature of the pasture. The cow posed the only potential collateral damage. Finally, the commander asked if he needed to know any other details of the situation before making his decision. In response, the BAO as well as the pilots insisted that the insurgent was a good target, for he had just attempted to kill brigade soldiers. In agreement, the commander gave approval to engage as long as the pilots could clearly identify the target. Even though the gunner was eager to pull the trigger, however, he commented that he could not verify that the insurgent was the only person under the tree. In other words, he could not tell whether or not children or anyone else might be hiding under the tree.

as well. Upon hearing this, the commander cancelled his approval to engage, for he was unwilling to accept such a risk. Alternatively, he gave approval to the Apaches to destroy the van, which the Apaches did without hesitation.

By this time, the approval process had taken nearly an hour. Meanwhile, a patrol of brigade dismounted soldiers approached in support of the Apaches. After several minutes of searching houses and other structures along the road, the soldiers detained over a dozen Iraqis for questioning. When two apparently belligerent Iraqis expressed their disapproval of the situation, the soldiers saw fit to cuff them and to shove them to the ground. Unfortunately, the soldiers also saw fit to kick the detainees multiple times while they were cuffed and lying on the ground. Hence, in a matter of seconds, a squad of soldiers managed to show evidence of abuse on video tape immediately after an hour-long process had taken place to prevent any wrongdoing. An Apache pilot's comment on the abuse was caught on audio as well, and it sums up the far-reaching impact that the soldiers' lack of honor contributed to the war effort: "If those Iraqis weren't planting IEDs today, they will be tomorrow."

### **QUESTIONS TO PONDER...**

1. Should the pilots have engaged the insurgent under the tree anyway? Explain your answer.
2. Would the possible consequences have been acceptable? Why or why not?
3. How do you suppose it is possible for a squad leader to destroy in seconds what took nearly an hour to protect?
4. How can we train our soldiers to use honor in their decision-making processes?
5. What techniques can you use to control rage and other negative emotions from clouding soldiers judgments? How can leaders help?
6. Think about a) Was it right to adhere to the rules and procedures? b) What action would have had the best outcome, following the rules or shooting? c) What was the most virtuous thing to do? Does a, b, and c all have the same answer? If not, why?